



by LCdr. Patrick Grady

This is not the stereotypical tale involving super-human aviation skills and derring-do. And it's not a story that begins with "There I was flying inverted, in the goo, at night, a hundred miles from homeplate, out of gas, and out of ideas." It is a story of how we aborted a training flight at night because too many little things were just not quite right.

I was scheduled for a tactics flight. We were supposed to go feet wet and work the mission systems. It was the squadron operations officer's dream: lots of night time, during which we'd complete copious amounts of tactical qualifications.

We determined early that the weather was a factor. Ceiling and visibility fluctuated from 1,000/2 to 700/1. With weather dropping below basic VFR and no special VFR procedures for night flight, we had to change the mission. Our new mission was basic airways navigation.

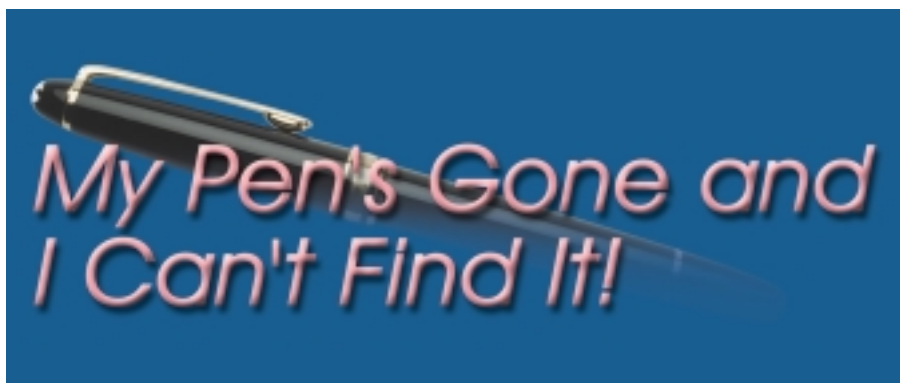
We intended to file and fly a round-robin with a brief stop for approaches at Yokota AB and GCAs at Atsugi. Once again, the weather foiled our plans. To file, we required an alternate. With 700/1 over the Kanto Plain, we had no legal alternate. So, we waited.

The weather improved. The ceiling lifted somewhat and the visibility increased. We could file a route but we had lost time and opted to stay in the local GCA pattern. We told the SDO of our intentions, read the aircraft discrepancy book and preflighted. Everything went well until we tried to turn on some lights. The lower console lights didn't work. In all of my years of flying the SH-60B, I had never

heard of a crew downing an aircraft because some of the interior lights did not work.

For a brief moment, I wondered why this was a big deal. We were staying in the pattern. Then common sense hit me like a freight train, and I decided that I was entitled to some lower console lighting. We returned the aircraft to maintenance and waited until repairs were complete.

It was quality flight time in the GCA pattern. We were in and out of the clouds and in between the cloud layers. We were logging both night time and that coveted actual instrument time. Add the communication challenge of talking with the foreign controllers and it was quite the workout. But my copilot and I were both on glide slope, on glide path. I was having one of those flights that reinforced the notion that flying and being a naval aviator were righteous things. Then, I dropped my pen.



It bounced under my seat. I twisted left, then wiggled right, but I couldn't find it. My crewman came up the tunnel to see if he could locate it. He, too, was unsuccessful. While my crewman and I were preoccupied with searching for my pen, I suddenly remembered where I was—in a helicopter, in the GCA pattern, at night, in the goo. I had lost my situational awareness and had allowed my copilot to fly solo.

I briefed my predicament regarding my pen to my copilot, and we decided to land. After touchdown, I realized we might be pressing too hard. I pitched the idea of calling quits to the crew, and they agreed.

This story obviously reinforces the idea of securing personal items like pens, glasses, and flashlights so that they do not FOD the cockpit. But that is not why I wrote this article. This tale raises two important issues.

First, when is it time to say when? There is always some pressure on every flight. When you launch, someone, somewhere has expectations: increasing night hours, putting bombs on target, or using OPTAR. As aircraft commanders, mission commanders, or section leaders, we are obliged to meet those expectations by accomplishing the mission. However, we are also obligated to exercise mature, sound judgement, to make the hard decision to throw in the towel when the risks outweigh the gains. The challenge is to recognize that dilemma when it occurs, make the right decision, and then accept the consequences.

I thought that the operations officer would give me grief about cutting a night event short but

he never said a word. In fact, no one said anything negative at all.

Second, can you recognize a degrading situation? Sometimes it's easy. Other times, it isn't. I remember the story of the boiled frogs. A frog placed in a pot of boiling water will surely try to jump out of that pot. A frog in cool water that is gradually brought to a boil will remain in the pot oblivious to the hazard that engulfs him. Those subtle degradations can get you into trouble.

I had experienced poor weather, a mission change, a minor electrical problem, cockpit FOD, and a brief loss of situational awareness. None of those conditions are unique or exotic. They have happened to many others but in this situation, I decided that enough was enough.

Was my situation all that bad? Individually, those challenges do not make for a bad situation. However, when they are considered collectively, it is easy to say yes, it was a bad situation.

Was I headed for a mishap? I can't say—events that did not occur cannot be discussed with any certainty. I can certainly say that we landed without incident. We, unlike the frog, bailed out before the water got too warm. 🦋

LCdr. Grady is the OinC for HSL-51's Det 6.

On Cat 1

Coming Attractions for April

- SAR Helos in the Storm
- The Red Badge of Discouragement
- My Vibrating Approach

Cdr. David Baranek, USN (Ret.)